

ALTERNATIVES TO THE HIGH SCHOOL EXIT EXAM

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We are pleased to offer the following comments to assist the State in its study of alternatives to the CAHSEE for all students. We believe that our academic expertise make us well qualified to provide solid recommendations regarding alternatives. We are faculty members in the Department of Education in the Graduate School of Education at UCLA and direct UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access. In these capacities we conduct research on opportunities to learn in California schools and assess the congruence between school resources, conditions, teacher quality, and students' school achievement, high school completion, and college eligibility.

In the statute authorizing the CAHSEE, the Legislature determined there may well be alternative ways for students to demonstrate the same skills and content knowledge tested on the exit exam other than through the CAHSEE. It states that students "may demonstrate their competency and receive a high school diploma" through transcripts and alternative tests of equal rigor in the academic areas covered by the high school exit exam." We strongly agree that California should provide students with alternative ways (beyond the CAHSEE) for students to demonstrate the same skills and content knowledge tested on the exit exam.

Compliance with the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. As we consider options for students who have not yet passed the CAHSEE, it is important to note that, without the provision of alternatives, California's existing policy does not meet the standards for fair and valid assessment outlined in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing and summarized by the National Academy of Sciences. According to the National Academy, any high stakes educational decision "should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student's knowledge and skills should also be taken into account." Current policy calls for students to be denied a diploma solely on the basis of their score on the CAHSEE without considering other information about students' knowledge and skills. California is virtually alone among the 50 states in adopting a single test for high school graduation without exemptions or alternatives.

The Academy's Board on Testing and Assessment also notes that an assessment should be able to determine "whether a students' performance on a test reflects knowledge and skill based on appropriate instruction or is attributable to poor instruction or to such factors as language barriers or disabilities unrelated to the skills being tested." Valid inferences are undermined by the use of a single test not constructed to measure the learning of English language learners or students with disabilities. Finally, since California does not monitor whether students have had actual classroom access to degrees of standards-based instruction, it is currently impossible to make a determination of whether students have received appropriate instruction.

Alignment with High-Quality Exit Exam Policies in Other States. A number of alternatives have been adopted by states as means for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in addition to the use of a high school exit examination. These include a range of alternative assessments for students with disabilities and English language learners, as well as alternative measures for all students, such as:

- Alternative tests (college entry examinations, AP tests, military entrance examinations, and tests offered in students' native languages)
- Coursework that reflects state learning standards, at specific levels of achievement,
- Locally developed performance assessments, including portfolios, senior projects, student work samples, and performance tasks
- State-developed performance assessments, including performance tasks and student work samples scored using state rubrics.

Each of these strategies has strengths and limitations. Given the goals that California's State Department of Education has expressed for the exit examination in this state, we propose that the state develop, as an alternative for all students who fail the exit exam, a set of performance assessments linked to the state learning standards that can be administered and scored locally using state-established standards. This approach, which has been adopted in Washington, Oregon, and New Jersey, among other states, has the virtue of providing tasks that are comparable and clearly linked to state standards that are also responsive to different learning approaches. New Jersey's strategy is worthy of particular note, as it requires districts to provide remedial coursework as well as performance assessment alternatives to students who fail the exit exam. Thus, the system promotes focused learning opportunities around the standards. The performance tasks clearly reflect the standards, provide multiple ways for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills, and maintain student effort, engagement, and learning. New Jersey is one of the few exit examination states that has both increased its graduation rates, which are among the highest in the nation, and has high and increasing student achievement in reading and mathematics. Thus, its strategy appears to have both raised standards without pushing students out of school.

Performance tasks that might be used could include a set of discrete tasks representing specific standards as in New Jersey, a more integrated assessment such as a senior project

that evaluates multiple standards in one larger task, as in Pennsylvania, or a collection of student work samples developed to demonstrate specific skills and scored using state standards, as in Washington and Oregon. Any of these approaches could be designed to ensure the assessment of equivalent or higher skill levels in standards domains. At the current moment, it may be easiest to imagine the feasibility of implementing the first approach statewide. We recommend that the state immediately examine the development and implementation of a statewide performance assessment alternative, building on the successful experiences of other states. The details of any alternative approach and its technical quality would be a focus of attention for California.

Knowledge about the range of needs of special education students, the requirements of IDEA, testing standards, and the experience of other states also suggest that, while many special needs students will be able to benefit from a well-constructed alternative assessment, additional alternatives for such students are likely to be required in line with their individualized education plans.

Alternatives for the Class of 2006. Unfortunately, the study of alternatives comes too late to provided for a full consideration and validation of alternatives for the Class of 2006, including their validity, reliability and lack of bias. Therefore, we offer two short-term solutions.

Local Diploma Alternative. We believe the state should consider, as professional standards suggest, “other relevant information about students’ knowledge and skills”, including students’ passage of the courses required by the state and the additional courses and requirements stipulated by local districts to receive a diploma. The state should allow the granting of a local diploma to those who have fulfilled these requirements, and offer a special state designation on the diploma to students who have also passed the CAHSEE. Importantly, we do not consider this an appropriate long-term solution.

Summer School Course Alternative. We also believe that the state should consider a summer program for the class of 2006 that follows the New Jersey model of guiding students who have not yet passed the exam through a set of standards-based tasks. Such a program might be conducted by community colleges or County Offices of Education, with financial support and guidance from the California Department of Education..

The summer school course option represents a viable alternative to the CAHSEE only if significant steps are taken to ensure that these courses provide students with the highest quality instruction in small classes that offer students a great deal of support . Unlike the Local Diploma Option, described above, the Summer School Option could evolve into an alternative that would meet both the requirements and the intent of the CAHSEE legislation, if it were developed further as an opportunity available to students during the school year as well as during the summer between grades 11 and 12.